Since my research ‘On Notions and Practices of Community’ is not particularly tied to success stories at community partner sites, but rather involves interrogating and understanding how community is lived, enacted and represented in everyday life, this short foray into questions of ‘civic participation’ and ‘community networks’ will outline and highlight the need in Community Networking and Informatics research to more clearly and rigorously unpack the term ‘community-based initiative’. If we are to better understand ‘how community networking can act as a catalyst of local, regional, national and international civic participation’, then probing the discourses that constitute ‘community’ and how they operate through ‘communal activity’ would seem to be a key point of interrogation.

Loader and Keeble (2004) caution that too often the term ‘community’ in community-networking and informatics initiatives (particularly concerning government-based initiatives in the UK) is used to denote homogenous groups of people, digitally-divided between the info-haves and the info-have-nots. In this way, government-sponsored community-based initiatives are understood as projects of ‘social regeneration’; the exclusive realm of the marginalized and poor—ethnic minorities and immigrants. Loader and Keeble ask: “Why is it that the term is seldom used to describe wealthier, middle-class social relations? Looking at the research on
community informatics one is certainly struck by the fact that these initiatives do indeed seem to take place primarily in disadvantaged localities or with excluded groups. So what do we make of this characteristic of community informatics? What does it tell us about the nature of these projects?” (p.36) And I add, what does this tell us about the nature of the Canadian Government’s community networking initiatives?

In her paper and presentation on behalf of the Department of Heritage entitled ‘Social Capital and Community Networking: Ethno-cultural Use of Community Networking Initiatives in Canada’, Maureen Doody (2004) specifically states from the outset that “the rise in the development of Community Networking (CN) initiatives in Canada ‘aims to increase social cohesion, inclusion and integration, especially with reference to disadvantaged groups, such as immigrants, the unemployed and single-parent families’” (p.2). Clearly, the limited definition of community Loader and Keeble describe in the UK is also enabled by the Canadian Government. The paper’s exclusive focus on the role of community networking initiatives for ‘immigrants, the disadvantaged, and ethno-cultural groups’ is telling of this pervasive regularity in government; a discourse Loader and Keeble (2004) characterize as communities fit for the information poor.

Despite the fact that the term community is used in common agreement in everyday life, it clearly means different things to different people. When questions of what constitutes community are highlighted, ambiguity and contradictions abound. Loader and Keeble (2004) suggest that our taken-for-granted everyday agreement on, and use of the term community hinges on its fusion with communication processes. “…it is imbued with the aura of companionship and human warmth which derives from its linguistically related concept of ‘communication’. Consequently any technologies which foster more and perhaps better communications between people contribute to a greater sense of community” (Loader and Keeble, 2004, p.36).
Looking at research that has interrogated questions of community relations, civic participation and ICTs in the last decade, we see streams of thought enthusiastically emphasizing how communities can be empowered through the use of online networking technologies (Kavanaugh, Cohill, and Patterson 2000; Schuler 1996); while others cautiously warning that the emergence of cyberspace communities may in fact weaken local ties between individuals, families, and larger social structures like government (Wellman 1999). Even a cursory examination of Smith and Kollock’s (1999) edited anthology ‘Communities in Cyberspace’ reveals the ambiguity of these streams of thought—some researchers emphasizing the positives of community networking, such as new communal empowerment achieved through the defeat of time and space afforded by ‘virtual communities’; others suggesting negatives like a loosening of local ties between people and social entities. But despite often being at philosophical odds over the impacts of community networking and informatics, one element that tends to hold these streams of thought together is an emphasis on human agency and activity (Loader and Keeble 2004), belying shared foundations in anthropological and ethnomethodological strategies of interrogating and describing action, clearly evidenced in ‘Communities in Cyberspace’ as well as in edited anthologies by Jones (1998), Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000) and Nelson, Tu and Hines (2001).

And it is therefore not surprising that many researchers in the fields of Community Networking and Informatics, and Internet Research in general, tend to focus in on, and describe what is there; what is happening; what actions are observable and materializable. So says Vincent Mosco (2004) in The Digital Sublime:

Much of what has been written about computer communication, the Internet, or cyberspace focuses with one eye on what we might call its material characteristics. These describe the major technologies that produce cyberspace, the political rules of government, and the economic rules of the market that go a long way toward organizing it. This singular focus is understandable: cyberspace is somewhat new, and so the technologies and rules that govern its use are in a formative stage and warrant close scrutiny. Nevertheless, we would benefit from considering what the other eye sees: the cultural or mythic character of what computer communication creates. Cyberspace is indeed technological and political, but it also a mythic space—perhaps even a sacred
...seeing vigilantly with both eyes means recognizing that computer communication makes up and is made up by technological and political practices as well as by mythic and cultural ones...We must comprehend the culture of cyberspace if we are to deepen what we know about its more material qualities. In essence, culture, particularly myth, is our starting or entry point... (p.10-11)

For Mosco (2004), technologies embody and drive the utopian myths of their times. Whether the myths are about the telegraph, radio, television, or community-networking technologies today, Mosco suggests that continuity rests in the utopist visions people engage around the advent of new technologies, the fantastic stories they tell about them, how through their use people will “…experience an epochal transformation in human experience that [will] transcend time (the end of history), space (the end of geography), and power (the end of politics)” (p.2-3). Drawing on Gramsci, Mosco suggests that ‘myth is congealed common sense’, that although the taken-for-granted is “…continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions that have entered ordinary life” (p.29), there are nonetheless ‘powerful philosophical currents’ that leave behind ‘sedimented common sense’, establishing ‘folklore of the future’. For Mosco the ‘real’ power of new technologies is only revealed when they exhaust their mythic capital; when they withdraw into the social woodwork and become a part of the banality of everyday life.

Taking up Mosco’s challenge, ‘On Notions and Practices of Community’ puts aside considerations of the material in favor of the mythical. Rather than focusing on ‘what is there’ or ‘what is happening’ in terms of technology, community networking and civic participation, this research seeks to probe how discourses related to community operate through community-networking and informatics initiatives and the implications of this for civic participation. What stories do people tell about community-networking initiatives? What narratives do other actors, such as government and academic researchers, tell about them? What myths about communities underlie these stories? How do community-networking practices open and limit possibilities for communal action? How do they play into power/knowledge relations?
This line of questioning is also inspired by, and reflects Loader and Keeble’s (2004) cautioning that:

… the optimistic notion of community life as an embodiment of the ideal way to live may not itself be shared by all citizens. Whilst many champion the positive benefits of strong communities, far fewer, it seems, express concerns over how community relations may act as a means of domination… the new ICTs may be technologies of empowerment for community groups and members but also the means of their subjugation. Community can be a means of social control as much as a wellspring for social capital. Community activists and development workers need to be aware of this ambiguity in their negotiations and deliberations with community members, public institutions, sponsors and the like.

In conclusion, this attempt to discursify the fields of community networking and informatics reflects concerns with how what we are often calling community-based initiatives are more likely some form of techno-political-economic initiatives wherein the values, agendas and desires of external stakeholders, such as software and hardware corporations or government or universities are superceding the ‘real’ values, agendas and desires of communities. And where the language of subjugation and domination may sound harsh and severe, history has proven that there are clearly reasons to be highly concerned with, and raise awareness to the potential for technology to be used as a means of social control; as a means of cementing hegemonic practice. Indeed, if we are to better understand ‘how community networking can act as a catalyst for local, regional, national and international civic participation’, then understanding the discourses that constitute ‘community’ and how they operate through ‘communal activity’ would seem a key point of interrogation for questions of civic participation.
Bibliography


